



Ms. Scofield was not looking forward to her meeting with Shane Muncie. Sometimes his eccentric personality and foolish antics could be amusing, but she wasn't in the mood for it today. As the drama teacher for Edwardsville High School, Ms. Scofield was responsible for putting on two student productions a year and this fall the play was an ambitious drama; *The Last Of Mrs. Lincoln*. Unfortunately, she'd just lost one of the cast members to a basketball team that had, unexpectedly, made State. This young thespian/point guard would, therefore, be in Topeka dribbling on opening night instead of on the boards, stammering.

Opening night was less than two weeks away and Ms. Scofield needed a replacement. She needed Shane Muncie.

It would be awkward, however, asking because Shane had auditioned for the play. And, even though Shane had been a consistent part of Edwardsville High's drama team since a sophomore - and he was a graduating senior this year - Ms. Scofield passed him over due to the fact that this was a serious production. There were no comedic parts. Shane's ceaseless goofiness had been great for *Don't Drink the Water* and *Bell, Book, and Candle*; but would've been a distraction here.

Desperate times, however. He was the only boy in this small, largely rural school who could learn, stand and deliver the lines in such short order.

If only he wasn't such an irrepressible spaz.

"Hey Ms. Scofield," Shane knocked on the door before entering the classroom. "You wanted to see me? Did I do something wrong? You didn't find that paper I was writing on? That was just a joke...."

Ms. Scofield smiled and lifted her chin. She was by no means pretty, but she wasn't yet thirty years old, unmarried, and still had a woman's figure and a flair for the dramatic. She knew the students - particularly the boys - gossiped and speculated about her, so she could imagine what one of Shane Muncie's errant notes might have implied.

"No, Shane. Come in. Sit down."

Shane shuffled between the desks. He was tall and ungainly. Awkward in his own skin. His nose was humped and large, a feature he often used for comic effect, and his hair a scuffled mess of dirty blond feathers. He had blue eyes that couldn't hide a thing, and they were darting around now, nervous.

He sat at a desk on the front row. Ms. Scofield perched herself on the top of the teacher's desk and tugged on her denim, ankle-length skirt.

"Shane," she started. "Dear Shane. You know the basketball team is going to State?"

"Yeah? So?"

"So Steve Royal is going with them."

"Okay?"

"Steve was supposed to be playing Ninnian Edwards in *The Last of Mrs. Lincoln*, but now he won't be able to."

"Oh."

Time stretched. Shane's face remained a blank canvas of clueless stupidity. Ms. Scofield slumped. "I'm asking you to take over the part, dummy."

"But I thought you didn't want me in this play," he replied.

*Don't be a petty little shit*, Ms. Scofield thought, but checked herself and said, "No, Shane, there just weren't enough parts to go around. You know I love to cast you in our productions, but this just wasn't right for you."

"But now it is?"

"Well, all things considered, yes."

"Geez, I don't know. I'm kind of busy these days. You know I'm writing a book?"

"Shane...."

"It's about robots. From the future."

"Shane...."

"They can feel emotions; like love and sadness."

"Darling Shane...."

"The hero robot is named Rusty. He cries a lot."

"Look, you're the only one who could possibly do this. I'm begging you, please."

*That's it. Appeal to his ego. Now, give him a warm smile, pull your shoulders back and....*

"Okay, Ms. Scofield. I'll do it."

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The part Shane took over wasn't very involved in the action so he had plenty of time to screw around backstage with the other secondary actors. During dress rehearsal he and his play-wife, Jody Martin, were rummaging through the prop-room, knowing they wouldn't be cued up for another fifteen or twenty minutes.

"Whoa," Shane exclaimed, "Check it." He'd found a WWI gas mask and turned it over in his hands, trying to figure out how to fit it on his head.

"You know Danielle?" Jody said, wrapping a rainbow boa around her neck. "She said she'd go to the prom with you if you asked."

"Danielle Jonas? Why the hell would she want to go to the prom with me? She doesn't even know me! You're full of shit." Shane bent over and placed the crown of his head in the gas mask's helmet.

"Well, maybe she thinks you're a cool dude and wants to get to know you. Ha!"

Shane struggled and pushed and wedged himself into the prop. "Holy shit," he said, his voice barely discernible behind the hard plastic and metal. "It smells like death in here."

"Anyway," Jody continued. "I told her I'd tell you and I told you so...."

Shane started clawing at the neck of the mask. "Hey! Help! I can't breathe!"

Jody ignored him at first, then heard the genuine rising panic in his voice and saw his eyes bugging behind the Plexiglas visor. She rushed over and started pulling at the helmet.

Eventually, with Shane on hands and knees, and Jody tugging with one foot braced against his shoulder, the mask popped off.

Extracted now, Shane's face was brick red and his ears looked like they'd just been slapped around by David Schultz. He gasped and said, "The prom with me? Is she crazy?"

"You guys are on in like two minutes!" One of their costars called from the doorway.

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Danielle Jonas had a larger part in the play and was on stage most of the time. Shane watched her from the wings during the next dress rehearsal.

Danielle's most defining characteristic was a luxurious, glorious, flowing mane of platinum blond hair. Untethered, it flowed down her back in waves of soft curls. Braided, it looked like something that could turn lethal in the hands of Indiana Jones. For the play, she wore it coiffed; a huge, beautiful crown dripping gold ribbons.

Aside from that, eh, she was okay. Her face was a long and had an equine quality and she was skinny as a rail with little up top. Plus, she was only a sophomore. Also, to Shane she seemed a trifle dull and humorless. Her contributions to group

conversations were rarely insightful or clever and she almost never laughed at his jokes.

Still, unless somebody was lying, she had expressed an interest in going out with him which put her in rare company. Exceedingly rare. In fact, so far the number of girls willing to date Shane during his entire High School career had been one. Her.

So he watched Danielle drift around the stage; hitting her marks, speaking her lines carefully, loudly, and wondered *what if...?*

"She's got crabs," somebody whispered behind him.

Shane turned and saw Roger Massing - short, greasy hair, thick glasses and flannel shirt. The twerp held the title of Assistant Stage Manager, but really he was just an awkward student with a ridiculous crush on Ms. Scofield. In a way, it was cruel how the teacher let him hang around all the time, allowing his deviant fantasies to flourish; but on the other hand, he gladly ran all her errands and worked his heart out doing grunt labor on the stage. He was the drama department's perfect little bitch.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Shane scowled down at him.

"Danielle," Roger said, scratching the tip of his nose. "I heard you were going to prom with her. I thought you should know; she's got crabs."

"You're full of shit."

Roger shrugged. "Valerie told Virgil that Danielle uses a special medicated soap after gym class. Virgil told Brett and he told me. The soap is for to take care of crabs. All the girls moved their lockers away from hers."

"Roger, go away," Shane said. "You bother me."

The short geek drifted off to where he could get a better look at Ms. Scofield who was sitting in the audience, taking notes.

Shane continued waiting for his cue, but now there was a black cloud hanging over his head. *Sure, crabs.* The only girl who had ever even considered him for a date would have to have crabs, wouldn't she? On stage, Danielle collapsed in a chair, hiding her face in her hands, fake-weeping. Under the spotlight, her golden hair looked like a pirate's treasure. *And what a shame,* Shane thought, *if the carpet that matched those drapes was all chewed up and threadbare.*

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Shane steadfastly avoided Danielle over the next few days; easy enough to do during school as they had no classes together, but he also started taking the long way home, walking on the out-of-the-way side streets in case she was cruising the main roads, looking for him.

It was down one of those narrow streets where Shane saw Bobby Bates shooting hoops at a dilapidated park next to the middle school. Shane had time to kill so he dropped his backpack and entered the court. "Yo," he called, holding out his hands for the ball. "Bobby rock."

Bobby delivered a chest-pass. Shane grabbed it and made a running shot. It missed. Bobby rebounded and took the ball outside the arch. Shane went into defense mode for an impromptu one-on-one.

"I hear you're taking Danielle to the prom," Bobby said as he blew right by Shane and scored two.

"What? No. Who told you that?" Shane dribbled around the arch.

Bobby shrugged. "It's all over school. She has crabs, you know."

Shane launched a prayer. It wasn't even close. "Yeah, but, I've been thinking, and that soap could be for any number of things. It doesn't have to mean crabs."

"What soap?"

"The medicated soap. Isn't that what you're talking about?"

"I don't know anything about no soap." Bobby head-faked and scored while Shane was still looking at the sky.

"Well then how do you know she has crabs?"

"She got them from my brother."

"Philip? He's, like, twenty years old!" Shane dribbled off his foot and had to chase the ball down.

"Right. I heard them fighting about it the other night. They're in the basement screaming at each other; he's trying to tell her he got them from a toilette seat. Ha! Oh, she was pissed! Rightfully so, I'd say. Crabs, man. That's a hard-to-scratch itch right there."

"So if she's dating Philip, why would she go to the prom with me?"

"They're not dating. Just fucking. Besides, he can't take her to the prom, seeing as how he graduated last year." Bobby made a one handed rebound from the clumsy shot Shane heaved up.

"This is terrible." Shane watched the ball sail over his head and swish through the hoop. "What am I going to do?"

"Blowjobs," Bobby answered. "From her, anyway. You wouldn't want to go down there, though. I guess you could finger pop her, but I'd wear gloves."

"Thanks," Shane said. Bobby stole the ball, dribbled an unnecessary cross-over, and then drove the lane for a layup.

"Yeah, you don't want to mess with no crabs," Bobby concluded. "With Philip around, I've been taking my dumps at the Farmers' Market just to be safe."

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Opening night. The play is over, bows have been taken, roses delivered. Backstage the



thespians flit about with their costumes half-off; laughing and chatting, hugging and making plans for later.

At one point during the riot, Shane turned, and Danielle was there. "Good job!" she said, grabbing him in a hug. Tight. With one hand pressed against his lower back and the other on his neck.

Shane reciprocated stiffly. "You too."

"Are you going to Lisa's house?" Danielle broke the embrace; her hand now holding his.

"Uh. Yeah. Probably."

"Good." She smiled. "Great. I'll see you there."

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"So are you going to ask Danielle to the prom or what?" Julie came through the door of the boy's dressing room without so much as a courtesy knock.

Shane, dressed only in a wife-beater and briefs, squawked and pointed a finger for her to get out.

"Oh stop being a baby. Like anybody cares." Julie helped herself to a ratty sofa pushed against the wall. "So? Are you?"

"No! Nonononono. No! Out!"

"Too bad," Julie said. She enjoyed Shane's discomfort and her eyes flashed with amusement as she watched him frantically trying to step into his jeans. "Then she's going to have to ask you."

"Why is all of a sudden everybody so goddamned interested in my love life? Jesus!" He fumbled the buttons, got them wrong, tried again.

Julie shrugged. "Like watching a train-wreck, I guess. Anyway, that's what Danielle said. She said if you don't ask her tonight, she's going to ask you tomorrow. Pretty embarrassing, having to be asked to the prom by a girl. A sophomore girl no less."

"Why?" Shane's voice was broke and pleading. "Why is she doing this? I don't even *know* her!"

"Well, she's got cr-

"Gah! Yes! I've heard! She's got crabs! What has that got to do with me?"

"I suppose she thinks you're the only one desperate enough to take a sophomore with crabs to the senior prom." Julie tossed Shane his shirt. "I have to give her credit: that is a pretty astute observation coming from one so young."

"Oh screw you," Shane flopped down on the other side of the sofa. "It's not just the crabs; I don't even think I like Danielle very much, from what little I know about her. I get along better with her little sister. At least Amy has a sense of humor. What the hell am I going to do?"

"I suppose you could just tell her no."

"Yeah, right. Like I could ever tell any girl no."

"True. After all, half the school already thinks you're gay. Hey, that's an idea - you could ask Virgil to the prom. Then she'd have to leave you alone."

Shane showed Julie his middle finger. "Spin on it." Then he sat up, excited. "Hold on, wait a minute, that just might work!"

"Sure it'll work. But be careful; Virgil's got the kind of crabs that snap fingers off Norwegian fishermen."

"No! Not Virg. Another girl. Surely there's somebody else I can take to prom...?"

"Oh baby, I hope you're not looking at me. I've already got a date. Besides. Yuk."

"Okay, okay." Shane grabbed her knee. "But think! There must be somebody?"

She swatted his hand away. "Fresh."

"Not fresh. Desperate! You've got a lot of weirdo friends. Hook me up!"

"I run with a free-spirited crowd, yes, but none of them.... Well, now, what about Heather?"

Shane looked at her blankly.

"Heather Lovchin?" Julie prompted.

"Broomhilda?"

"You know you are such a shit. That was like so long ago, but you and everybody else in this petty little town will never let it go. It's a wonder she hasn't really killed herself, with how supportive everybody's been."

"Cool your jets. I didn't say no."

"Oh, well, thank you for deigning to even consider thinking of her as a human being. You know what," Julie rose to leave, "Forget it. You're on your own."

"Come on, Julie." Shane followed, pleading. "I know how it is. People around here still talk about how much paste I used to eat in elementary school. They throw glitter at me thinking it'll stick. Look, I'm sorry I called her Broomhilda, all right? I didn't think. But you have to admit - she's kind of... well... she keeps to herself."

"Have you ever tried to draw her out? Talk to her? Treat her decent?"

"Oh, you know what, yes I have. When we were in Mrs. Stevens' English class. We were in that group project together and I was very nice to her. Even still. She probably didn't say more than two words to me the entire time."

"So you would go to prom with her?"

"Yes! Well, maybe. I don't know. I'm having these Carrie flashbacks now-"

Julie pulled away. Shane cut her off. "Joking! I'm joking. Jesus."

"Okay, Shane. What do you want me to do?"

"Well, just.... Ask her if she'll go to the prom with me."

Julie gave Shane a withering look.

"Okay, what I mean is," Shane continued, "ask her if I were to ask her to the prom if she'd say yes. Yes?"

"Are you still stuck in the fifth grade?" Julie asked.

"Duh! All that paste I ate? Of course I am!"

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The next day, as everybody was arriving to prepare for another performance, Shane waited in the parking-lot for Julie. When he saw Danielle's tomato red convertible driving up the road, he ducked behind a dumpster. He kept an eye out while she gathered her things and breathed a sigh of relief after she entered the school.

Shortly, Julie pulled up in a royal blue K-Car. Shane trotted over to greet her.

"So?" he asked, taking her bag. "What'd she say?"

"Well," Julie arched an eyebrow in his direction. "She didn't say yes."

"Okay? What's that mean?"

"You told me you treated her nice in Mrs. Stevens' English class."

"Yeah?"

"That's not the way she remembers it. She thinks you hate her."

Shane dropped the bag. Then scooped it up again. "What in God's green hell are you talking about?"

"She said you teased her a lot. You made her cry."

Shane lost all words. He stood there flat footed, stammering.

"Right," Julie took his arm and started for the school. "I know you better than to think you'd do something like that. You're a retard and a fool, but you're not mean. So I told her you were probably just goofing off and she took it the wrong way."

"Of course!" Shane exclaimed. "I wouldn't... make her cry? I wouldn't do that! I don't remember her crying at all."

"She waited until she got home for the waterworks. Anyway, she agreed that she might have been overly sensitive. Also, I reaffirmed just how much of an ass-clown you are, and she could see how that's probably what happened. You were just being an idiot."

"Well, sure. Yes. I mean, God. I made her cry? How?"

"Oh she hardly remembers. It's not important. Anyway, I told her you were interested in taking her to the prom and she did this," Julie bobbed her head both up and down and side to side at the same time.

"What does that mean?"

"I've no idea. I guess you'll just have to go talk to her yourself."

"Sure. Man, I feel sick that I made her cry." Shane looked so upset, Julie patted him on the back and stroked his shoulder.

"She's over it by now. Go talk to her."

"Do you have her phone number?"

"She'll be here tonight. I asked her to stick around after the show, so maybe you can get with her then."

"Okay, thanks Julie." Shane shuffled away, feeling low.

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Shane was still in costume as he jogged across the school's parking-lot, waving both arms at a Chevette that was reversing out of a spot. The car's brake lights flared then went dark as it stopped. Shane moved quickly to the driver's side window and tapped on the glass.

The window came down. "Heather!" Shane knelt to look in the car. "Julie said you were leaving, thank God I caught you!"

Shane took in a sharp breath when he saw Heather bathed in the glow of the dashboard lights. Walking under the harsh fluorescents of the school halls with her head permanently hung, face obscured by a curtain of tangled hair, Shane had passed by Heather countless times without ever actually seeing her. Now, in the dark of night, with an ethereal light cast upon her countenance, Shane realized that this strange creature who had been the subject of so many terrible rumors and cruel jokes throughout the years had grown into a stunningly beautiful young woman.

Her long, blue-black hair had been combed out and tucked behind her ears. It was smooth and alluring as velvet; Shane's hands twitched at the thought of running it through his fingers. Exposed, her face was a delicate heart, the skin smooth with a dusky complexion. Her eyes were wide and dark; curious and warm. There was even a chocolate-drop beauty mark above her cupid-bow lips. As if to counter these almost impossibly flawless features, her nose had a slight hump. Ah, but the actual effect of that imperfection made her adorable. Shane had to resist the temptation to lean in and plant a kiss on that cute schnoz.

"Are you okay?" Heather asked.

"Oh." Shane snapped out of it. "Yeah. All that running - whew! I'm not used to that much exercise."

Heather smiled politely.

"Hey," Shane said. "Can I...? Well. Can you wait here for a minute? No, never-mind. Did you want to go get an ice-cream or something?"

"I don't know," Heather checked the clock on the dash. "It's kind of late."

"Winstead's is open. I'll buy you a 'scaper?" Heather pursed her lips and started to shake her head. "Or just a coco?" Shane pushed, desperate.

"Okay," she relented.

"Great!" Shane patted the door. "Can you drive? My mom's got the car tonight."

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"I would've waited for you to change," Heather said. They were sitting at a booth in Winstead's, Shane still done up in a late 1800's costume; stiff, cardboard collar, ruffled shirt, pinstripe brown vest and top coat with tails and matching trousers. Pearl buttons and cuff-links. The only thing missing, fortunately, was the stovepipe top hat which he'd left in the car.

There weren't many other customers in the diner at this hour - mostly older people going to or from night shifts - but all of them gave Heather and Shane a double-take. The attention made her uncomfortable.

"Thanks, but I couldn't risk it. I really have to talk with you."

The waitress came by with their coco, she smirked again at the get-up, and left.

"Shane," Heather said, wrapping her hands around her mug. "Julie told me you were

going to ask me to the prom and -"

"-Wait, later for that," Shane interrupted. "First I want to apologize. Julie told me about how upset I made you when we did that project for Ms. Stevens? Honest to God, Heather, I had no idea. I know I run my stupid mouth too much, but I never, ever would have tried to hurt you deliberately. I can't even remember what I said, but I'm very sorry for it, whatever it was."

Heather lifted a shoulder, "Thanks, Shane. It was a misunderstanding on my part. No big deal."

"But what was it? Do you remember?"

Heather tucked her chin down and Shane worried that he'd lost her. Then she lifted her eyes and said, "You had taken charge the project and were delegating tasks?"

"Yes?"

"So you were telling everybody what to research and who to talk to, and you made a comment about how great it would've been to interview this one scientist, but he had died recently. So then you asked if I could talk to him anyway. Something like that."

Shane flopped back against the padded seat. "Jesus," he said. "I remember now. Oh, Heather, that's awful. I'm so sorry. I don't know if you believe this - it's weird, looking back on it, I'm not even sure I can believe it - but I honestly don't think I meant it like that. I sometimes say things without... understanding how they'll be heard. Does that make sense?"

Heather tilted her chin for a reply.

"Can you forgive me?" Shane asked.

"Yes," she decided. Then smiled wryly. "Worse things have been said to me."

Shane surprised himself by reaching across the table and taking her hand. It was



warm from the coco. He held it for a while and said, "Thank you."

She lowered her eyes again, pulled her hand back, and set it on her lap.

*Shit*, Shane thought. *I've lost her.*

"I know why you want to go to the prom with me," Heather said.

"Forget about it, Heather. Taking you to the prom was just another one of my stupid ideas. Wait. No. See? There it is again - my big mouth." Shane ground his teeth together. "Someday somebody will invent a time machine and I'll go back and shoot myself in the head on the day I'm born. That's the only cure for my kind of idiocy."

"Don't say that," Heather said softly, almost a whisper. Under the table, one hand rubbed the thick ridge of a scar that ran across her wrist.

Shane clenched his upper-lip between his teeth. He tried to imagine how he could fuck this up any more and decide that was impossible.

"You're beautiful," he said on an impulse, and then immediately thought - *Hey, there it is! You did figure out a way to fuck it up even more. Congratulations.*

Heather, shocked, looked at him with her mouth agape. Shane, just as shocked, stared back with wide, terrified eyes.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "I didn't mean..." He clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. This was spiraling out of control.

"You didn't mean what?" Heather said, after what seemed like an eternity of silence. "That I'm beautiful?"

Shane risked opening his eyes. Heather sat across from him, her perfect lips smiling mischievously. Her hands were back on the table.

Shane exhaled. "No, I meant that. What I didn't mean was to come across like a pathetic loser. I'm really bad at this kind of thing, or had you noticed?"

"I'm sure I'm not the best at it either," she replied.

"Can I ask you something?"

Heather nodded.

"Will you go out on a date with me? Not the prom, just a date. A diner, a movie. Conversation that isn't so weird. Hopefully not as weird?"

"I'd like that," she said.

Emboldened, Shane took her hand again. This time she left it there for him to hold. And, after a while, she reached over with her other hand and took his, making Shane's heart flutter.

"But does this mean," she said, "that you're not asking me to the prom?"

Shane opened his mouth to blurt out an answer, closed it, gave himself a moment to formulate a correct response, and then replied, "See what I did there? I thought before speaking. I need to make a habit of doing that. So to answer your question - fuck no, I'm *not* not asking you to the prom! I want to go with you! But I don't want you thinking that I'm just using you to avoid going with Danielle, because I'm not. Or I wouldn't be. I mean, yes, I was going to be, but not now. Ah shit. Looks like I should've taken even more time before speaking."

Heather laughed. "Julie told me about the thing with Danielle," she said. "But you know what else she said? She told me that even though you can be... imprudent... you've got a decent heart."

"She called me imprudent? That bitch."

"She thought," Heather continued, "and I agreed, that it would be good for me to get out of the house and be with people for a change. To experience my senior prom, like a normal person. Or as normal as possible with Shane Muncie as my date."

"Remind me to thank her for that."

"So I'd pretty much decided I would go, if you asked," Heather admitted.

She squeezed his hands affectionately, then broke away to drink some coco.

"How long have we known each other?" Shane asked. "At school? All twelve years, I'm sure, even though I only really remember the last eight. So it's strange, but I feel as if I'm meeting you for the first time tonight."

Heather lowered her eyes. The past had a way of making her uncomfortable.

Shane noticed the change in her demeanor and changed tracks, "Here's to fresh starts." He held up his drink for a toast. Heather smiled and tapped her mug against his.

"Fresh starts," she echoed.

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In short time, the romance between Shane and Heather became the talk of Edwardsville High. Everybody had a comment about it; mostly spoken in whispers away from the ears of the subjects at large. The overall consensus being that it was neat the two misfits had found each other. Hilarious, and more than a little creepy, but neat.

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Shane folded the garment bag over his arm and rang the doorbell of Heather's house. He bounced on his heels while he waited, transferring the shoe-box he was carrying from one hand to the other to burn nervous energy. When Heather opened the door, he saw an expression on her face that caused him to ask, "What's wrong?"

She placed her hands on his shoulders, rose up on her toes, and kissed him on the lips. It was brief and awkward because his hands and arms were loaded with clothing, but it was their first kiss.

And, when it was over, Shane said, "Hi."

Heather laughed and pulled him inside. "I heard what you did today."

"What I what?" He entered the house dazed. Heather lived in a meticulously clean, one story ranch with modern furniture and art hanging on the walls. Like Shane, she stayed with one parent - her father - but he was a high-ranking military officer and rarely around. They had the place to themselves.

"The fight with Virgil?" She took the garment bag and draped it over the back of a white leather sofa. The shoe-box got dropped to the floor.

"That? That was nothing."

She crushed her body against his and, unburdened, he wrapped his arms around her tight. When she lifted her chin, he met her lips with his and they held each other like that for a good, long time.

When the embrace finally broke, Heather licked her lips and said, "Nobody has ever done anything like that for me before, Shane. You have no idea how much...." She placed her cheek against his chest.

Earlier that day at school, unaware that Shane was behind him, Virgil had made a crack that, if Shane and Heather ever had a child, it would be like a cross between the Omen and Weird Al Yankovic.

And then Shane had tossed him against a wall of lockers and shoved a forearm under his chin.

The fight had been broken up quick by a nearby teacher and both combatants claimed it was just a gag so no punishments were handed out, nevertheless, word must have gotten around.

"Thank you," Heather said. And then she lifted her eyes to meet his. "But you really can't go around doing stuff like that."

"Um. Okay." Shane stroked her hair. "Are you aware that this is kind of coming across as somewhat of a mixed message?"

She took him by the hand and led him to the sofa. They sat close enough so their legs were touching. She held both his hands in her lap. "Virgil is your best friend."

"He's a dick."

"No, he's not. He just said something stupid." Heather grinned. "Now I know that's never happened to you, right?"

"Right," Shane nodded.

"You should apologize to him."

"Oh, no...."

"Shane," Heather sat up straight and grew serious. "This is my fresh start, remember? I don't want to be the freak everybody whispers about. So let them talk about me out loud. That can't hurt me anymore. See, I've got a pretty cool boyfriend now, and he must think I'm okay."

"He thinks you're wonderful." Shane squeezed her hand. "But this is my fresh start, too. I'm done with being the class clown; a walking punch-line. Besides, I've got an awesome, beautiful girlfriend now. She must think I'm not a total ass."

Heather tucked her legs up and lunged into Shane, pushing him on his back. He swung his legs onto the sofa and she laid on top of him. "She thinks you're great," Heather said, then smothered his mouth with hers.

Heather came up on her elbows, her pelvis pressed against his stomach, and looked Shane in the eyes. "A compromise," she said.

"Okay?"

"No more fighting for me unless it's, like, really, really bad. Like a threat or something." She ran a finger over his lips.

Shane caught the finger between his teeth then let it go. "Okay. But I get to decide what is really, really bad."

"Okay, but you have to promise to think about it first. Remember when you said you were going to start thinking before speaking? Same thing. Because, actually," Heather tilted her head and smiled, "a cross between the Omen and Weird Al Yankovic? That is kind of funny."

"God I love you," Shane said. His eyes grew wide with panic when he saw the shocked reaction those words elicited. "Oh."

Heather kissed him again, passionately, her tongue pushing between his lips, playing over his teeth. She moved her mouth to his neck, nibbling and kissing around his collar. Her lips found his ear and she whispered, "I love-Ouch!"

The garment bag had slid off the back of the sofa and its heavy wooden hanger thumped Heather on her head.

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"My mother used to be a fashion model," Heather explained. "Before she married my father."

They were in the attic looking at multiple racks of fancy dresses that were sealed up in see-through plastic bags. There must have been over a hundred outfits hanging on the pipes. Shane whistled low.

"Wow."

"Yeah. She was beautiful." The attic was lit by one hanging 60 watt bulb and it swayed slightly from having been turned on. Waves of light washed over Heather's face. She unzipped a bag and pulled out the sleeve of a red satin gown, softly stroking the fabric with her fingers.

Shane had never seen anything so sad and lovely.

"Do you have any pictures of her?" he asked.

"No," Heather shook her head. "I used to have some magazines with her, but no. They're all gone now. My dad threw everything away. Except these dresses. They're worth a lot of money, or so he says."

The sorrow in her voice and the way her shoulders slumped caused an unfamiliar ache in Shane's chest. He wished he was smart enough to say or do something that would make her happy, but he knew better than to try. Instead, he just went to her side and gently held her hand.

She leaned into him. When he looked down, she was smiling.

*Hey now, sometimes the boy gets lucky.*

"Did you want to go someplace else?" Shane asked. "I can get you a new dress."

"It's okay. I'm fine." She kissed the back of his hand. "Thank you."

Heather took the garment bag Shane had brought with him and hung it on a pipe. She tugged down the zipper exposing the blue tuxedo with a robin's egg pin striped vest, ruffled shirt, and emerald ascot and said, "Oh my."

"I borrowed it from my uncle," Shane said. "He used to be in some kind of bee-bop choir in college. Hey, if it's too hideous, let me know. I can rent something."

"It is wonderful!" Heather exclaimed. "And we're going to find the perfect dress to match. Come, help me look."

They browsed through the racks together; laughing at the outdated fashions, marveling at timeless classics. Having fun, the time flew. Night fell and the porthole attic window grew dark. They still hadn't found the right dress.

"Hey, check this," Shane used both hands to make a separation in a line of clothes. Behind them was another line of dresses that had, until now, been hidden because it was cramped up between the rack and the wall.

"Let me see," Heather said, stepping through the opening Shane had made. He followed her and used his bulk to push the rack away so they'd have some room. Heather ran her hands over the hangers then stopped. She clamped the hand over her mouth. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Heather?" Shane asked.

She took a simple, white dress from the rack. It had a lace collar and one large blue flower print on the side. "Oh," Heather moaned. "Oh, Shane. I remember this one from before...."

She sat on the floor, cradling the dress. Shane sat next to her. He put an arm across her shoulders, but she hardly acknowledged his presence. She wept silently.

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*In the light of day, responsible adults would tell you about the Lovchin family. It was quite a story: Sarah Lovchin - the beautiful wife and mother - ran off with a charismatic hippy. She took her young daughter with them to California where they lived in some horrible commune for a year or so. Alan Lovchin - the devoted father - hired a lawyer to claim sole custody of the child and had her brought back to Kansas. Good thing, too, because a sensitive girl like Heather really needed a stable home life.*

*However, at night, after drinks, those same adults related a different story. This one they told in whispers and with raised eyebrows; unaware that their children's ears were big enough to catch the hushed words. Then later, beneath the prison-bar shadows of the jungle-gym in the school's playground, the children interpreted the events in their own voices:*

*Heather's mom is a witch! She and Heather were living in this coven where they worshiped Satan and Heather saw all these human sacrifices and stuff. They were going to sacrifice her too, because, you know she's a virgin and all, but her dad hired*



*these army guys to go in and rescue her. Kind of like the A-Team. But Heather, man, she really got messed up. Like possessed or something. She kept trying to run away to go back so they could sacrifice her. She even tried to kill herself! Anyway, they put her on all these pills now, so she's okay.*

*Unless the pills stop working....*

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"I'm sorry," Heather said, wiping tears from her cheeks. "I'm a mess."

"Hey," Shane held her close. "It's okay."

She swallowed then exhaled through her nose. She turned away. "I should go wash my face."

Shane used two fingers on her chin to gently bring her back. "Here," he said, tugging out the bottom of his shirt and offering it to her. She buried her face in the fabric, then sighed deeply. She left her head resting against his chest and wrapped her arms around him.

"I miss her sometimes," Heather said. "The way she was before...."

"Do you think she'll ever come back?" Shane asked, stroking her hair.

Heather's hands clenched into tight balls and her body went ridged.

"Heather?" Shane said. "What's wrong."

"No," she sobbed. She started to tremble. "Oh God, no!"

"Hey, Heather," Shane pushed her away so he could see her face. Her eyes were wild with panic, intensely focused on a spot behind Shane's back.

Shane turned to look. He saw nothing at first, then, after checking Heather's eyes again, figured she was staring at a robe, or a cloak, that was hanging on one of the

beams. The garment was pitch black and looked like it was made from heavy wool.

"What...?" Heather's trembling reached near seizure level intensity and she started to whine. Shane held her by the shoulders. "Heather! What's wrong."

She threw out an arm and pointed. Shane whipped his head around.

The black robe took flight. It flapped over their heads, made a wide circle, and then wrapped itself around the hanging light-bulb, casting the attic in total darkness.

Shane grabbed Heather desperately, trying to cover every inch of her with his body to protect her.

There was a tinkling sound - the light-bulb breaking - then deathly silence.

Perfect darkness; perfect silence.

Shane waited for his senses to adjust. His eyes would soon catch the ambient light from the window; his ears would open to the hum and flow of the house. Then he could get them to safety.

"Heather?" Shane whispered, rubbing his hands over her back. "Heather?"

At first, she didn't respond. Then, she made a low humming sound. She moved out from under his arms and stood up.

"Heather!" he cried in a panic. Impossible, but there was still no light whatsoever. If she stepped away, he would lose her in the darkness. He reached for her and she took his hand. She pulled him up.

Still, she would not reply to his voice.

She started walking, tugging him along behind. Again, it was impossible! Even with no light, Shane knew there were obstacles all around. There was no way Heather could navigate in this pitch, but somehow, they were moving towards a destination.

She stopped. Shane kept talking, trying to get her to reply, but she had no words for him. She took his hand, raised it, and placed it against something smooth.

Shane rubbed. It felt like glass, set in a circular wooden frame. The window, then. But how...? There would be streetlights or stars beyond. The world outside could not be this devoid of light.

Heather put her hand over his and pressed down on one finger. Shane focused at the area. There - assuming this was the window - in the sky above: a pinprick of light. Infinitesimally small, but red and shining.

Then, next to it, another pinprick flared. Same size, same color.

Like eyes. Gazing down on them from the void.

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*It has the same blood as sorcerers and madmen. Blood calls to blood.*

*Madmen have thick tongues and clumsy lips and cannot respond. They fill their heads with nonsense and line their veins with addictions because they so desire to hear the name of their master but are eternally frustrated by their own incompetence.*

*Sorcerers have Its name tattooed on their blood, but they have forgotten the language. So they are confused by the call; their blood pulses, catches fire, some try to call forth the answer with sacrifice and ritual, but these efforts are futile.*

*The response is just below their skin.*

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*From madmen It expects obedience.*

*From sorcerers It requires recognition.*

*Not all have forgotten. One must say Its name. One sorcerer will have the tongue, and*

*a madman will open his ears.*

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Standing next to Shane in the absence of all light, Heather spoke.

And Shane took in a sharp breath of air.